Rancho La Brea Adobe
6301 West 3rd Street
Los Angeles, Los Angeles County
California

HABS No. CAL-354

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Western Office, Division of Design and Construction
450 Golden Gate Avenue
San Francisco, California

RANCHO LA BREA ADOBE

Los Angeles County, California

ADDRESS: 6301 West 3rd Street, Los Angeles

OWNER: Mrs. Earl B. Gilmore - The Gilmore Corporation

OCCUPANT: Mrs. Earl B. Gilmore

USE: Private Residence

HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The one-story adobe house built by the original grantee of Rancho La Brea continues to serve as a family residence, the plan of the basic structure virtually unchanged since pastoral times. The history of the house, as simple and straightforward as the lines of its construction, contrasts dramatically with the complex development of the surrounding ranch lands it once governed. It has changed hands only twice and has retained its original function without interruption, while most of the 44 hundred acres granted in 1828 to Antonio Jose Rocha have lost identity beneath the grid of city streets. The rancho's gentle hills and strange, black-pooled brea marshes noted by the first Spanish explorers have seen herds of cattle and flocks of sheep come and go. The Indian brea artisans have given way before Californios loading carretas with the heavy asphaltum for the roofs of the flourishing pueblo of Los Angeles, and they in turn to the insistent gringos. A sudden forest of derricks once covered the oil-rich land, only to be succeeded by tracts of suburban homes, the houses by apartments, stores and towering office buildings.

Skeletons of prehistoric animals came to light in the brea pits, drawing archaeologists from all over the world to the sorting tables set up where the new Los Angeles Museum of Art has recently taken shape.

A racing stadium and a baseball park flourished and vanished; a vast television studio taking their place. Dusty roadside stands selling corn and melons during the depression years evolved into Farmers Market which now draws some 20 million visitors each year to the very courtyard of the old adobe. The significance of the structure has been recognized by the Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Board. The building bears a plaque placed by the Native Daughters of the Golden West on June 28, 1935 when Hancock Park-La Brea was made a State of California Historical Landmark No. 170.

The importance of the one square league of land (7 square miles, approximately 4400 acres) - granted by the Mexican government to Antonio Jose Rocha and Nemisio Dominguez as the Rancho La Brea - was well recognized in 1828 when Jose Antonio Carrillo, Alcalde of Los Angeles, set his signature to the document. It contained a provision that inhabitants of the pueblo were to have unmolested rights to take brea from the pits as they might have need of it for the roofs of their adobe houses.[1] Only 8 miles west of town, the pits had been a source of supply for three-quarters of a century - ever since the first tule huts had been replaced by sapling-roofed adobes. Workmen called it "la huesementa", the boneyard, in joking allusion to the debris of old bones which encumbered the pits.[2]

Much earlier the site had been noted as valuable for the missionary explorer Fray Juan Crespi in his journal entry for Thursday, August 3, 1769, wrote: "...the explorers saw some large marshes of a certain substance like pitch; they were boiling and bubbling, and the pitch came out mixed with an abundance of water. They noticed that the water runs to one side and the pitch to the other, and that there is such an abundance of it that it would serve to caulk many ships." [3]

The Indians used the brea, in fact, for just such a purpose. The plank canoes with which they navigated between the mainland and the Channel Islands were made water-tight with it. They also employed it to fix shell decorations in place, to secure fibre lashings, and as a fuel.[4]

A contingent of Spanish soldiers sent from San Diego in 1770, subsequent to Crespi's report, found themselves forced to battle with the Indians encamped at the pits before they could return with the load of brea they had been ordered to fetch.[5]

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Antonio Rocha, the first legal owner of this valuable land (Senor Dominguez apparently acting only as guarantor in the transction) [6] was one of the earliest non-Spanish arrivals in Los Angeles. A native of Portugal, he came into San Pedro in 1815 as a sailor on a British trader and, with ten others, jumped ship while it lay at anchor. He found Los Angeles a profitable place to establish himself in his trade as blacksmith and gunsmith and soon became one of its most substantial citizens. He married Maria Josepha Ventura of the Ventura County ranchero family. The adobe house he built after acquiring title to Rancho La Brea was large by the standards of the time. He chose as location a small knoll beside a stream immediately north of the well established track from the pueblo to the brea pits.[7] His cattle, lanky animals chiefly valued for their hides, ranged far northward from the ranch house and the brush-walled corral where the horses, needed by him and his vaqueros, were guarded against Indian requisition. His lands reached north to present-day Hollywood Bowl and south to Wilshire Boulevard. His western boundary with neighboring Ranch San Antonio became San Vincente Boulevard, while his eastern line crossed the rolling chaparral of Hollywood about where the television studios of Gower Boulevard now stand.

In 1830, a brush fire swept into the tar pits and burned with great intensity for two weeks. Indians were summoned from the missions to assist in bringing it under control, and, although the house and outbuildings were threatened, destruction of the new rancho was averted.[8]

Don Antonio died in 1840 and title to Rancho La Brea passed to his widow. Over her signature a petition for the patent to the land was presented in 1860 before the commission which had been set up to regularize land claims in the new State of California. It was not until many years later, however, that a decision was handed down. Signed by President Ulysses S. Grant, the patent was issued by the United States Surveyor General and the Land Office on April 15, 1873.[9] The Rocha family by this time had been long settled on another grant to the southwest, El Rancho Rincon de las Bueyes, and had sold Rancho La Brea to Major Henry Hancock. The deed is dated November 16, 1860 and is signed by the son of Don Antonio, Jose Jorge Rocha.[10]

Henry Hancock of New Hampshire was both a lawyer and a surveyor but when he arrived in Los Angeles in 1852 he found such an overwhelming

demand for his services as a surveyor that it is chiefly for his mapmaking that he will be remembered. He and his field crews set the first section posts, ran the first boundaries and recorded the first maps for many Southern California ranchos as well as for lands still owned by the pueblo of Los Angeles. Prior to his purchase of Rancho La Brea he had completed a difficult survey of the San Fernando Valley and numerous smaller surveys to the south of the pueblo. He had a thorough first-hand knowledge of the Los Angeles basin and may be presumed to have known land values. It is therefore of interest to note that he paid approximately $2.50 an acre, one of the highest prices recorded at that stage of the region's development.[11]

Major Hancock had married Ida Haraszthy, a daughter of California's pioneer viniculturist, Colonel Augustin Haraszthy. They moved into the comfortable Rocha adobe without making any changes in its basic construction and it was there that their son, George Allen Hancock, was born. Grazing continued to be the principal activity of the rancho. Hancock introduced sheep when the Civil War and post-Civil War markets made flocks profitable, and over the years improved the process of extracting asphaltum. He set up hugh vats for melting chunks of the crude tar in order to extract impurities, notably the troublesome bones. These settled to the bottom and could be thrown aside after the refined tar was poured into sand forms. Hancock's tar blocks found a ready market in San Francisco where they were used for sidewalk and street paving. In Los Angeles they continued to be used in roofing and, to some extent, as fuel.[12]

The refuse from his process, the gigantic bones, began to interest Hancock and as early as 1875 he had pointed them out to William Denton. Denton was enough of a scholar to recognize them as of Pleistocene origin, but he failed to publish his findings.[13] It was not until W. W. Orcutt, geologist studying the La Brea oil fields for the Union Oil Company, recognized the Scientific value of the bones and successfully brought them to the attention of archeologists and other geologists that they began to be understood.[14]

After Major Hancock's death in 1883, his widow, Ida, sold a portion of the rancho - 256 acres, including the house and outbuildings - to Arthur Fremont Gilmore in partnership with an ex-Civil War general named Carter. The partnership was soon dissolved, the men drawing straws to settle ownership of La Brea and another tract they had purchased. Gilmore's

draw brought him the Hancock farm. In settlement of legal fees, always a heavy expense in the period of title and boundary uncertainties, Ida Hancock transferred another tract to attorney Cornelius Cole, then United States Senator from California. Cole subdivided the land and established Colegrove, now part of Hollywood, which he made his residence for the remainder of his long and very active life. Retaining the major brea deposits, Mrs. Hancock herself subdivided, in 1892, a 20-acre tract just to the east with the stipulation that the Hancock family have a 15-year right to hunt. The "game" consisted of jack rabbits, coyotes and quail.[15]

Arthur Gilmore had come to Los Angeles in 1874 from his native Illinois to try his luck as a dairy farmer. Despite droughts and poor stock, he managed to establish a herd by the late 1870's and profited during the expansion of Los Angeles which followed the opening of trade with the Owens Valley mines. He married Mary E. Bell (of the colorful and temperamental Los Angeles pioneer family) and their son, Earl Bell Gilmore, was born February 17, 1887 in the La Brea adobe. Acquisition of the Hancock farm reflected Gilmore's business success and his initial plans called only for improvements in dairying, ignoring the significance of asphaltum seeps and brea pockets in the fields.

Young George Hancock, on the other hand, grew up with a lively interest in the strange pits of bubbling asphaltum and the indication they gave of subterranean activity. When Edward Doheny worked at the pick-and-shovel excavation near 1st Street and Glendale Boulevard, which he called his oil well, George Hancock was on hand. He realized that the seeping asphaltum probably indicated underground oil on his own property.

But oil on La Brea lands was first brought to the surface by farmer Gilmore when he tried to sink a new water well near the stock pens. Drilling rights were immediately sought by the Salt Lake Oil Company. In 1901 their wells reached the 2500 foot depth - and wealth. Young Hancock worked as a driller, learned the procedures and began drilling on his own La Brea lands with sensational success. He completed 71 producing oil wells without a failure.[16]

The old brea pits, the pastureland, the very dooryard of the La Brea adobe itself - all became a part of the forest of timber derricks and nodding pumps. But the eucalyptus trees planted by Hancock to shade

the house and serve as windbreak for the fields towered even higher by this time, dwarfing the low, shake-roofed dwelling. The Gilmores set out palm trees and Italian cypress, planted vines and shrubs and attempted to transform the bare farmyard into a garden, a welcome green island in the bizarre landscape of derricks and black sumps. Adobe wings were built extending back from the central portion of the house on either side, but no information on the date or dates of construction has been found. The earliest available photographs, snapshots dated by the secretary of the Gilmore Corporation as 1910-1915, show the wings as definitely old construction but with somewhat more plaster adhering to their walls than can be seen on the main section. Improvements in plumbing, flooring and lighting, renovations and maintenance work - these have been constant during the Gilmore occupancy and continue today.

The tile roof was added in the 1920's, perhaps at about the time the adobe was used by Metro Pictures Corporation as the setting for a movie. Press photos dated 1920 in the files of the Gilmore Corporation show the courtyard dressed with a rustic lean-to porch, a stone-curbed well, garlands of Mexican chili peppers, animal pelts pegged on the walls, and what appears to be Spanish tile on the roof. At any rate, the heavy present-day tile roof is the most striking change in the structure since the earliest photograph. The character of the original farmhouse has otherwise been remarkably well preserved.

Having lived all his 77 years in the old adobe, Earl B. Gilmore died there on February 26, 1964. His widow, Mrs. Marie Dent Gilmore, continues in residence. The tremendous activity with which Gilmore surrounded himself during his remarkably wide-ranging career continues to swirl past the quiet walled garden and the cypress sheltered windows of one of Los Angeles' earliest adobe farmhouses.

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ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The following architectural description is based upon observations, and an interview at the adobe on August 7, 1965 with Mrs. Earl B. Gilmore, the widow of the former owner. These references together with early photos taken in 1900, 1912 and 1915 - on display at the Gilmore Land Company offices in Los Angeles - yielded data from which a picture can be drawn of the important architectural and structural alterations made through the years. The purpose of this report is to prepare a basis for a more thorough historical study that could be used to accurately restore the adobe, hopefully, at some future time. Although this historic structure dates from 1828, a part of the exterior and much of the interior seen today has been altered in appearance from its original early 19th century form. A substantial portion of the adobe walls, however, are still plainly discernible.

EXTERIOR

Overall dimensions - The general form of this single-story adobe hacienda is a "U" shape with the eastern side or base of the "U" approximately 61'-7" long with the westerly projecting legs or wings, approximately equal, are about 62'-0" long. The space enclosed by the wings forms an open ended patio. A covered porch or veranda extends along the eastern elevation. The plan is typical for its period.

Wall Construction - Old walls, interior and exterior, are about 24" thick, sun dried adobe brick, plastered both faces, rather crude, uneven and varying in thickness 2" - 4" at any given section of wall. Original foundations assumed to be typically rubble field stone; presently some occasional locations of broken plaster reveal red brick restoration repairs. Exterior and interior finishes are now stucco plaster over the old adobe walls.

Veranda - Extending along the full length of the east facade having a pitched roof, shallower than main roof, it can be seen in the above mentioned 1900 photo. The wood supporting posts are 4" x $6\frac{1}{4}$", resting on 5" high cement base and having pronounced decorative wood bracked capitals, probably of recent times; spacing is 9'-10" c.c. The present floor is brick-tile pavers, $7\frac{1}{2}$" x 15", running bond pattern laid at grade. Original floor is unknown.

Chimneys - One brick chimney can be seen in the 1900 photo, at approximately 12' from the north end of the living room, on the west wall. It appears to have been moved to its current location closer to the north wall. Another chimney now existing in the corner of the old southeast bedroom is not seen in this same photo.

Doorways and Doors - Soft wood frames and doors having divided lights, none appear to be original. The current main door on the east elevation was formerly a window opening; the original entrance, however, was at the opening which is now a window immediately to the south of the present door; these statements are based upon photos and Mrs. Gilmore's recollections. Exposed wood lintels, flush in the wall and projecting on either side of the openings are typical. At the patio, on the north elevation of the south wing (kitchen wall), one can see what appears to be a former door and window opening, now closed and plaster-filled. Finish opening heights from interior finish floor are now 6'-8", the main east door is 43" wide from adobe jamb to jamb and slightly splayed. Wood thresholds varying from 2" - 4" above grade.

Windows - Softwood frames and inswinging casement sash which have divided lights, four panels per leaf with exterior wood louvered shutters and wrought iron hardware (assumed - not original). Finish height of openings 6'-8" exposed lintels, splayed adobe walls all similar to door openings. Height of living room sills - 18" above floor.

Roof - The main gabled roof over the easterly portion of the structure, including the living room and the old southeast bedroom, is now approximately 18' up to the interior ridge beam, steeply pitched and finished with mission tile. The 1900 through 1915 photos clearly show a pronounced split shake roof. The change was probably made during the 1920's when the Spanish Revival style was the current fashion. Similar alterations have been recorded in other local adobes - - - such as the Lopez Adobe in San Fernando, see ref. CAL-341. The mission tile finish continues over the veranda roof, at a shallower pitch, and together with wood rafters, are exposed from below. The main roof is supported by 4" x 8" beams forming a simple truss with a bottom chord, exposed on the interior at the living room, and spaced at 4'-2" c.c. with 2x8 ship-lapped, planks as the exposed ceiling finish.

The roof pitch seems to conform with the 1900 photo, although the latter is finished differently.

The roofs over the westerly wings of the "U" plan, are similarly tiled, but of a much shallower pitch. Simple 2 x trussed rafters support these roofs which can be seen from an attic scuttle over the southeast bedroom. The old adobe bricks can be seen in the attic and extend 18" above the eave line at the wall between the dining room and old bedroom. Thus, the original main roof over the living room may have been a simple shed, sloping gently downward toward the east veranda, and probably brea covered, which was typical in the early Rancho Period. The roofs over the two west wings may have been nearly flat, at about the present eave line.

Cornice - At present, mission tile cap along the adobe rake line at the gable ends, and these tiles extend a few inches over the wood eaves. Formerly, exposed shingles; originally, unknown.

Miscellaneous - This hacienda was the center of an important early Rancho in Southern California and as such was supported by other accessory buildings and services. An old barn, for example, can still be seen as late as 1934 in one of the photos at the Gilmore Land Company, but no longer exists. A plaque placed by the Native Daughters of the Golden West during ceremonies on June 28, 1935, can be seen on the east wall near the veranda entrance. A 19th century dinner bell from the early rancho days has been mounted on a pole in the patio at the corner of the kitchen wing. An old pond to the west of the patio, existing for many years, has been removed. A portion of the east end of the patio has been enclosed in recent times for a sitting room. The kitchen wing (probably detached, originally) is now attached to the main structure at the dining room.

INTERIOR

Floor Plan - The "U" shaped plan referred to above is formed by a series of rooms connected to one another as follows: along the eastern side of the "U", a main door from the veranda, which formerly led directly to the patio, was flanked on the right or

northern end by a large living room and on the left or southern end by a bedroom. This entrance is now a window, and a balcony with stair has been added on the southern side of the living room. The southeast bedroom now leads directly to the dining room and thence to the kitchen, the latter two rooms form the southwest wing or leg of the "U". From the northern end of the living room, a door (which appears to be an original opening) leads to a bedroom. Beyond this room, originally entered only from the patio, is the former tack room, but in later times was the bedroom of Mr. Gilmore. These two bedrooms form the northwest wing. There are dressing rooms and bathrooms added in recent times on the north side of these rooms, which now provide access from one bedroom to the other.

Flooring - Originally assumed as packed earth and then rough wood planks. Later, changed to T&G hardwood.

Walls - The original plan described above is still basically delineated by rough adobe bricks, although now finished with stucco plaster.

Doorways and Doors - No original doors nor frames appear to remain, although some openings still appear original.

Base - Is hardwood. Original was probably 1 x 10 softwood.

Ceilings - Exposed planks in living room (twentieth century); plaster in north bedrooms; southeast bedroom, its vestibule (old entrance) and the dining room have exposed ceiling beams, approximately 3" x 8" at approximately 32" o.c.; the ceiling finish is exposed flat tile, period unknown.

Hardware - None of the original hardware appears to remain. One 19th century rim lock and knobs at the door from the living room to the northeast bedroom were installed by Mrs. Gilmore in recent years. Exterior shutters have antique-appearing wrought iron hardware, but probably not original.

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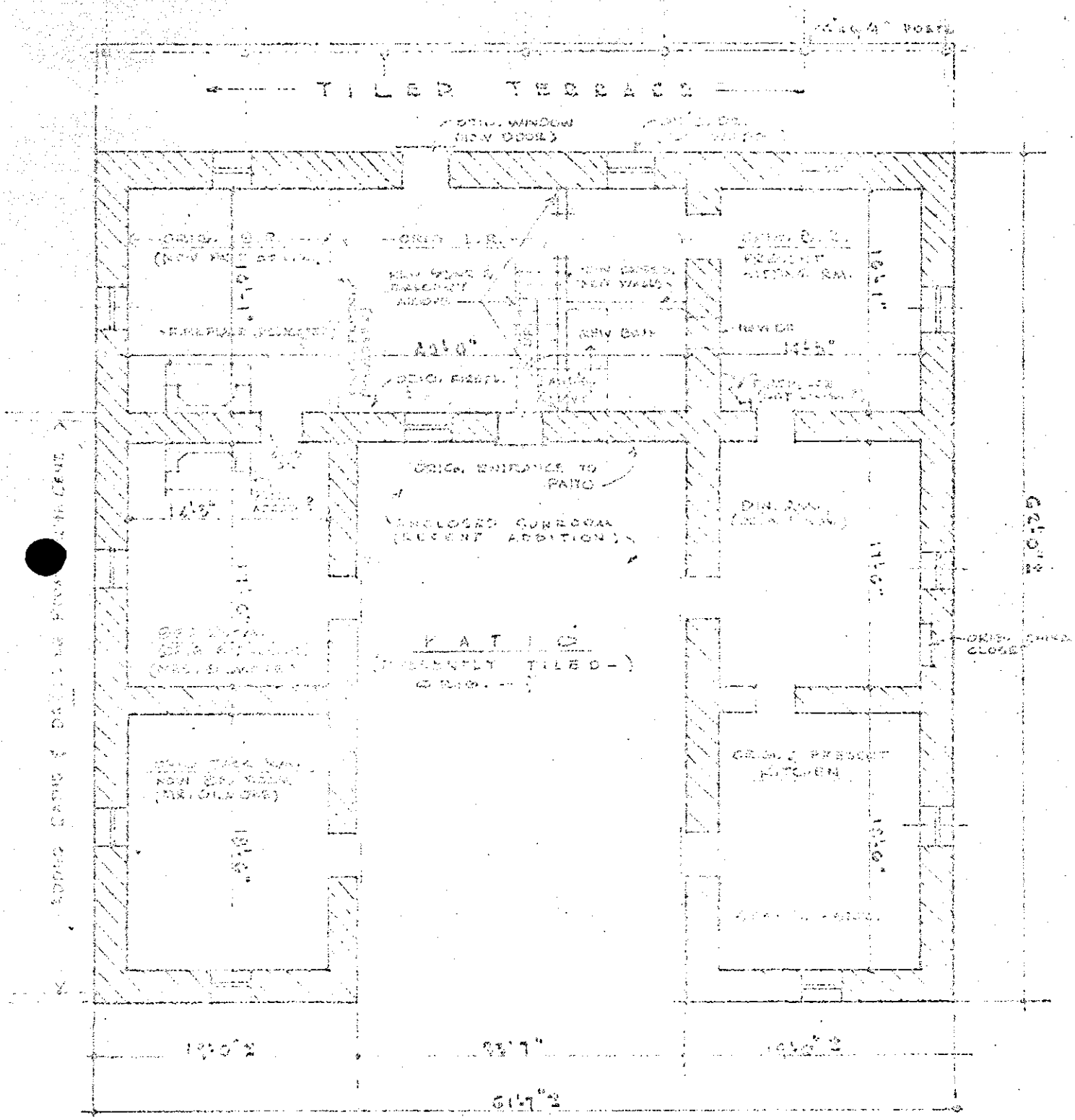

GILMORE ADOBE - LOS ANGELES COUNTY, CALIF.

FIELD MEASUREMENTS SCALE 1" = 10'-0"

PLAN PREPARED BY: A. SYLVAGNUS 1967-1968

SUBMITTED BY: R. GIRVIGIAN, A.I.A. PRESERVATION OFFICER, SO. CAL. CHAP. A.I.A.

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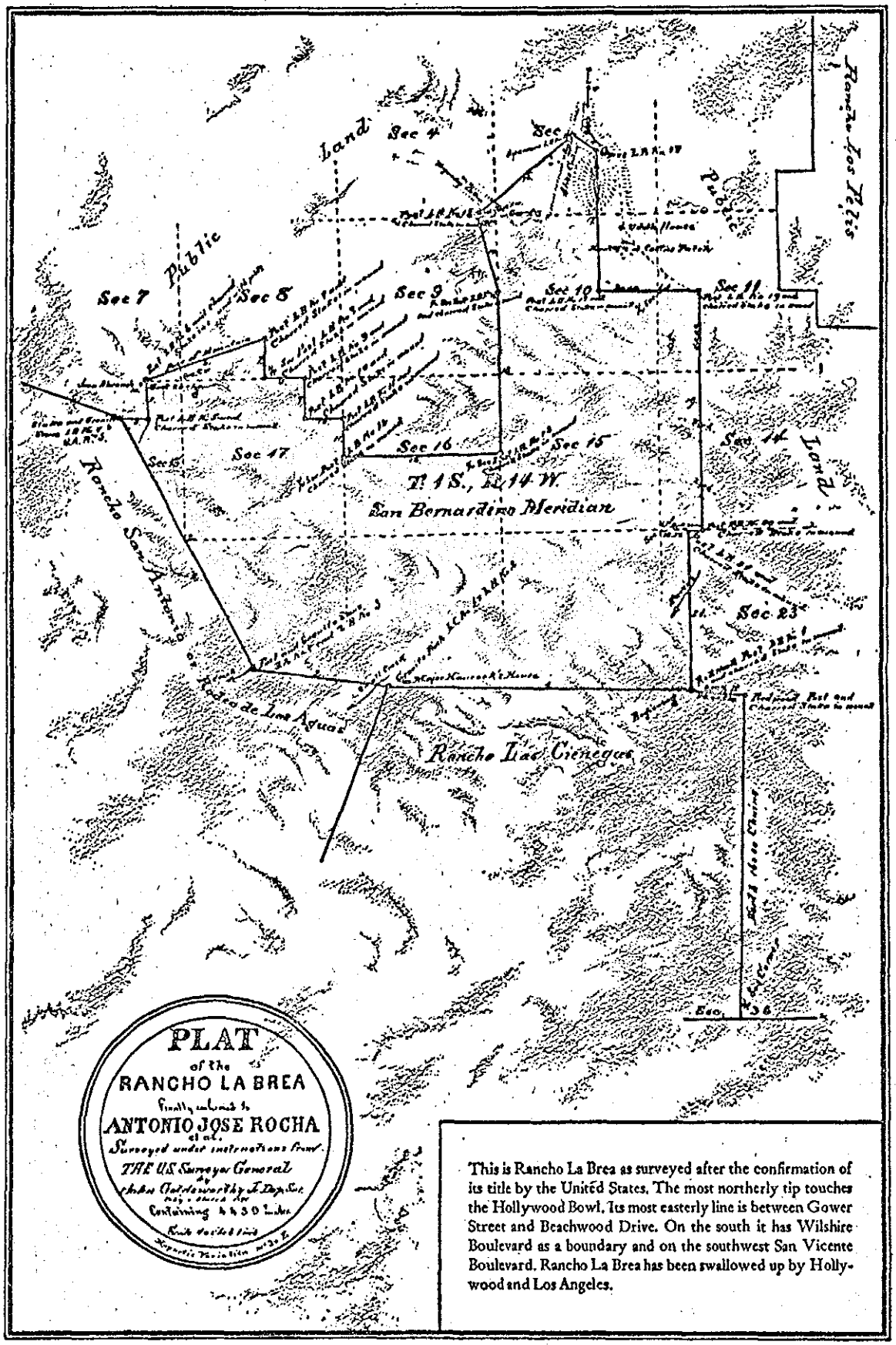

This is Rancho La Brea as surveyed after the confirmation of its title by the United States. The most northerly tip touches the Hollywood Bowl. Its most easterly line is between Gower Street and Beachwood Drive. On the south it has Wilshire Boulevard as a boundary and on the southwest San Vicente Boulevard. Rancho La Brea has been swallowed up by Hollywood and Los Angeles.